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Interpreting the Study of the Boston Fire Department



Introduction

The Finance Commission has reviewed the recently completed Study of the Boston Fire Department (BFD). There is no doubt, as the study indicates, that Boston has an outstanding suppression force. But management is lacking. The study found that "the BFD has strong leadership, but it often does not supplement that leadership with management skills." The Finance Commission concurs with that finding. However, it is troubling, that after more than a year and at a cost of \$128,000 the City has a report which softpedals major administrative shortcomings of the BFD.

In July, 1994, the Finance Commission completed an analysis of the Boston Fire Department (BFD). The Commission's report concluded that Boston has an excellent Fire Department with a high level of quality and commitment within the fire suppression workforce. However, there are 50% fewer fires annually in the city than just ten years ago. Given this reality, the Finance Commission urged the department to explore ways to provide its services in a more efficient and effective manner. Particularly important was the recommendation that a management audit examine every position within the department with regard to roles and responsibilities and that the BFD address the lack of personnel management systems and training.

At the time of the Finance Commission report, the City issued an RFP for a review of the department which would address current and future fire-related needs of the City. The recently completed review of the BFD recommends only minor revisions towards fire suppression services. It urges that much more attention be given to fire prevention. The study also identifies many of the longstanding "sacred cows" of the BFD,

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including 111 jobs that should be eliminated. Interestingly, in earlier drafts of the study the language was more direct concerning the woeful lack of management skills in areas other than fire suppression. It was noted then that BFD is operating with an excess of engine companies and suggested that 23% or 7.6 engine companies could be eliminated with no adverse affect on response time. That finding was revised in the final report.

The FinCom reiterates its concerns over management shortcomings. Although the language in the MMA study is too generous, the problems are identified. The BFD is top heavy, it should reallocate personnel resources and develop personnel and management expertise.

Despite stating in the report that, "An evaluation of the EMS operation was not in the scope of the study", the consultant reached a number of conclusions, mostly inaccurate, about the delivery of emergency medical services by Boston EMS. The recommendation that the City should staff, train, equip and operate 23 paramedic engine companies is without merit.

It would appear that the consultant came to the above recommendation as a way to address the dilemma of what to do about the excess capacity in BFD and the reality of fewer fires. BFD has been concerned about that issue and its effect on jobs. The idea of the BFD assuming a larger role in emergency medical services might appear to be the answer. It is not. The administration of Mayor Thomas M. Menino should ignore the recommendation to employ paramedic engine companies and continue with plans to upgrade EMS. Once fully implemented in June, 1996, the City of Boston will deploy, at peak periods, 18 BLS and 5 ALS units.

The BFD Part of the Study

The consultant did offer a number of recommended changes concerning the BFD that have been discussed in the past and merit implementation. The major recommendations included:

1. Establish response capability objectives;
2. Reduce the number of fire districts from 11 to 10 to enhance and even out the span of control;

3. Firefighters assigned to the motor pool should be transferred to firefighting duties and the motor pool should be civilianized;

4. A community based comprehensive fire prevention and education program should be developed;

5. Street alarm boxes should be discontinued;

6. Increase the frequency of fire inspections particularly those related to prevention efforts.

Further, the Finance Commission was pleased to see the study identify a number of the long time "sacred cows" of the BFD and suggest that they be eliminated. The recommended cuts are as follows:

<u>Unit</u>	<u>Positions Cut</u>	<u>Impact</u>
Fire Alarm	33	\$1,980,000
Fire Brigade	14	\$840,000
Maintenance	20	1,200,000
Marine Unit	14	840,000
District Chief	4	240,000
District Chief Aides	4	240,000
Hazmat	5	300,000
Lighting Unit	5	300,000
Photographer	2	120,000
Chemist	2	120,000
Radio Shop	4	240,000
Firefighter/Custodian	4	240,000

There are 111 positions identified in the study as being not needed. The consultant suggests adding the following 52 positions:

Rescue Squad	24	\$1,440,000
Community Fire Prevention Spec.	10	600,000
Dist Chief (EMS)	4	240,000
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The staffing analysis is well done in terms of positions with a few exceptions. The BFD is top heavy administratively and thus the direction should be to reduce and not reallocate the number of district chiefs.

One effective way to address the obvious problem of excess capacity is through fire prevention particularly better utilization and organization of existing efforts. For example, current practice allows for engine companies to do inspections from 9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. and again from 1:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. Further, there are no performance expectations. One engine company reported doing 433 inspections over a one year period where several others performed but 25 in that same one year period.

The staffing recommendations are long overdue. The Fire Brigade on Long Island responds to few calls, most of them at the Long Island Hospital, now used as a homeless shelter. The site can be covered more efficiently by training shelter employees and through assistance by the City of Quincy.

The maintenance unit should not be staffed with full time firefighters. The language in the study states, "The BFD devotes substantial resources to the motor pool using firefighters on a tour-of-duty-basis. These resources appear to be inappropriately allocated." What the consultant might have said is that it is a waste of resources to staff the motor pool with firefighters while ignoring community fire prevention needs.

The marine unit is another example of excess. It rarely responds to calls and as long as the boat is staffed with the engineer and pilot there is no need for three additional full time firefighters. An engine company could be assigned to serve on that unit when needed.

The consultant further suggests that the specialized units not be staffed full time, particularly the lighting unit and the hazmat unit. The report recommends realigning the City into ten as opposed to eleven districts. That would result in having four fewer district chiefs and aides. However, they then suggest that the newly configured EMS unit be staffed with four district chiefs and aides. That makes no sense. District Chiefs are not trained to manage medical emergencies.

Management

The most confusing section of the study are the issues of management and administration. The consultant recognized that the longtime management shortcomings of the BFD need to be addressed but took the easy way out. The consultant found that,

"management and administration burdens generated by a large organization such as the BFD are often increased when the command staff of the organization is pressed to achieve the primary mission of the organization." The translation of that statement is that they do a great job putting out fires but they are poor managers.

The study cites the following shortcomings:

1. The budget of the BFD will not allow for any significant changes without some resource allocation;
2. There is a need for enhanced computerization;
3. There is a lack of human resource management;
4. The department has no system of developing management information and communicating it within BFD;
5. Long-term planning is lacking.

The consultant learned that BFD is in dire need of management changes. It has been a longstanding problem at BFD due to the fact that non-uniformed personnel are not given management authority. The significant personnel, human relations and management shortcomings exist because the uniformed staff is trained to fight fires and not to manage.

A more direct interpretation is that the BFD is top heavy with superior officers. The BFD has 16 Deputy Chiefs, 54 District Fire Chiefs and 78 Fire Captains yet has no modern personnel or human relations functions. The consultant identified the problem but was less than firm in its solutions. Resource allocation sounds nice. What it means is to eliminate some unnecessary brass and add civilian management expertise which would bring the BFD into line with other city agencies.

It is not generally known that the BFD has a poorly managed personnel department. BFD has a permanent payroll of sick and/or injured firefighters. Presently there are 45 people on that payroll, a longstanding problem at BFD. Many of those employees will never be able to return to duty but are not retired. There are 29 firefighters awaiting retirement, some for over four years. This situation is due to poor management and in part to the lack of action of the Boston Retirement Board. It should come as no surprise that 2 of the 3 members of the Board are retired firefighters.

The consultant identifies personnel and human services management as a serious need. Light duty status is recommended for incorporation into the union contract. This suggestion has been made in the past and it should be implemented. Many firefighters on light duty could perform fire prevention duties and be productive. Light duty is provided for in the Police Department through the collective bargaining agreement with the patrolmens union and should be recognized in the BFD as well.

The need for human resource management is acute. The study mentions issues with respect to women at BFD without specifically identifying these issues. The problem is that there are presently only eight female firefighters. Of the eight, four have sexual harassment suits pending against the department.

The study identified the primary problem yet was exceedingly generous with its language. The BFD is an old boys network and has been for years. Until personnel dollars are reallocated into needed management and personnel improvements nothing will change.

The Errors Regarding EMS

The Finance Commission issued a comprehensive report on Boston EMS in December, 1994. Boston EMS is the primary provider of emergency medical services through its deployment of basic (BLS) and advanced (ALS) life support units. The Fire Department fulfills the important role of a first response unit. The consultant failed to understand that the City of Boston has a tiered emergency medical service response model of: first responder/defibrillation, EMT defibrillation and Paramedics. There is no incremental benefit from the added training of non-ambulance based personnel. It is incorrect to assume that the excess capacity that exists in the BFD should lead to the staffing of paramedic engine companies. Engine companies cannot transport patients.

The consultant underestimated the cost of its recommendations and ignored the obvious collective bargaining issues with the Fire Department. It oversimplified the training process for a firefighter to become a paramedic and was apparently unaware that the City of Boston was heading in a different direction to insure that the best possible emergency medical services are provided.

If the MMA Consulting Group had reviewed the performance of EMS and the need for emergency medical services it would have found that:

*** The most significant medical need based on calls for service is for basic life support services. The City deploys EMS resources based on documented need. The ratio of BLS to ALS units is almost 4 to 1. Any cross training to relieve pressure should be in the BLS service delivery area. Because there is no incremental benefit to train an employee to do something he/she will not do, it makes no sense to train firefighters in areas other than being first responders.

*** The study suggested developing an EMS equipment purchasing and replacement plan for the Fire Department. Recently the City funded and staffed an expanded role for Boston EMS. Its staffing has been increased. It has added five new units and replaced an additional ten. It is deploying units based on peak demand periods of time thus increasing peak coverage from 14 to 23 units. By June, 1996, there will be 18 BLS and 5 ALS units deployed at peak periods.

*** Boston EMS generates revenue through patient transports. While its budget for FY 1996 is \$13,047,300, it will receive about \$12 million in revenue.

*** The consultant ignored the realities of the respective collective bargaining agreements. For example, currently, only 70 of 200 firefighters trained as EMT's are on engine companies because the union contract determines the assignment process. The proposed changes will be costly. There will be paramedic ratings created and added costs should the City want to assign employees as opposed to having the contract dictate it. Conversely, Boston EMS just negotiated a new collective bargaining agreement creating 10 hour shifts. That allows for a much more comprehensive scheduling process. Clearly, the consultant failed to consider the history and roles of the respective unions.

*** The consultant failed to understand the in service ratio issues. It was critical of EMS response time. It recommended that the excess capacity in the BFD could reduce those ratios. In-service ratios is a measure of time ambulances are used to treat and transport. Fire engine companies are not the equivalent of ambulances.

*** Boston EMS deploys based on the demand for calls for service. The Fire Department cannot do that as its public safety requirement is different and calls for 24 hour daily coverage.

*** All EMS services are under the direction of a medical director. That would remain the same under the proposal. The medical director has already defined the respective role for the delivery of emergency services. It includes the Fire Department as first responders.

*** The consultant recommended the creation of a medical advisory board. They apparently were unaware that one already exists. It is comprised of physicians from the major Boston hospitals and sets policy for emergency medical care.

*** The consultant recommends merging dispatching services between EMS and the Fire Department. That would mean having EMS leave its position of working with the Police Department where all 911 calls are received. Presently, civilian telephone operators take all calls. Many of these employees are bilingual to meet the needs of Boston's diverse neighborhoods. That change would not serve the City well. If there is a change to consider it should be merging the dispatching operation of Fire, Police and EMS.

*** The consultant suggested establishing a program to educate the citizens about why a Fire engine might respond to a call for assistance. They incorrectly cite the fact that the public is not accustomed to that response. The Fire Department has been responding to EMS calls, over 16,000 times in 1994 and likely more this year. The public sees the same thing the Finance Commission found more often than not. A fire company arrives first but is not able to treat all medical emergencies. They wait for the appropriate BLS or ALS unit. The public wants one thing, an appropriate response when they dial 911.

Fire Alarm Boxes

The elimination of alarm boxes is long overdue. They are not used extensively and generate a large number of false alarms. There are a few areas in the city where the boxes still serve the intended purpose. Records indicate that some boxes are used and in those cases they should be retained. Those areas are easily identified. The elimination of most alarm boxes will result in a personnel reduction. The construction division of the the Fire Alarm Operation will not require the current level of staffing.

Conclusions

What will the Menino Administration do with the study on the Boston Fire Department? It cost the City \$128,000. Although it softpedalled many of the administrative shortcomings of the BFD, it identified what needs to happen administratively. The Finance Commission hopes that the study isn't tossed aside to gather bureaucratic dust at the taxpayers expense.

The suppression force is excellent, but in many other areas the BFD needs improvement. It is a top heavy agency with unacceptable levels of administrative shortcomings. It needs to enhance fire prevention and control personnel resources.

The suggestion to create 23 paramedic engine companies is unrealistic. Boston EMS does an excellent job with emergency medical services. The City realizes that and is moving to improve that service.

The City administration is aware that change is in order. It will not be easy to make changes at BFD but it is the right step for the City of Boston.

